

Talking and Listening to Youth

Fact Sheet

Communication is the cornerstone of our relationships with teens – be they our children, students, neighbors, clients or patients. Creating safe, open and honest channels of communication help us share information and hear what a teen thinks, needs or is doing.

Because adolescence is a time of developing personal identity, testing of boundaries and increasing independence from family, communication can be contentious, argumentative and unsatisfying.

Time is another factor– teens and adults are spending more time working, watching TV or using the computer, reducing the opportunity for conversations. Meal times are still one of the main opportunities for parents to talk and listen to their teens.

Why is Strong Communication Important?

Communication helps teens:

- Feel cared for and loved
- Believe they matter and are important to you
- Feel safe and not alone with their worries
- Learn how to tell what they feel and need
- Learn how to talk openly

KEEP TALKING !

Start talking and keep talking! Begin with easier topics like sports, the media (music, videos, games, the Internet), school, friends, the weather . . . then you can move on to sex, drugs and rock and roll.

There are some good reasons to keep talking. For example, studies indicate that clear, strong messages from parents to teens about sex are critical, yet parents report it is one of the most difficult things for them to do. So practice with easier subjects.

How Can Parents and Adults Who Care About Teens Help ?

- Start early – talk to your teen throughout their lives.
- Be available – set aside enough time to deal with the subject at hand.
- Don't let the TV, telephone or other things distract or interrupt.
- For families, eat dinner together as often as possible.
- If you want to start a discussion, ask your teenager's permission first.
- Be a good listener first.
- Show empathy, relax and be a good "sender" (tone, word choice)
- If a teen comes to you, recognize and thank him or her for trusting you to listen.
- Listen for tone as well as words. Watch body language.
- Encourage teens to express their feelings.
- Be ready to hear opinions you may not agree with.
- Resist the urge to lecture or nag.
- As you listen, validate what you can. There will be opportunities for dissent later.
- Ask questions about their ideas for solutions – don't always give answers.
- If asked a question, answer it. Don't evade.
- Don't pretend you know all the answers.
- If you are wrong, admit it.
- If you have to go to other sources for information, let teens know and then follow-up.
- Be a good role model for your communications with others.
- Lastly, offer your opinion.

Sometimes adults are silent because they don't know what to say, they are afraid they will say something that makes matters worse, or they are unable to communicate due to their own issues or problems.

Some adults never learned how to be healthy communicators. Some techniques can help:

- Take a few deep breaths.
- Wait 5 minutes before talking to a teen if you are angry or in the wrong frame of mind.
- Try to find words that label your feelings.
- Say it to yourself or write it down (practice).
- Share your feelings with another adult.
- Focus on the present – don't add up the past or the future.